COIN CONTROVERSY

Drake expert rejects San Quentin evidence

A Santa Rosa archeologist with nearly 20 years' experience sifting evidence of Sir Francis Drake's 16th-century visit to the California coast scoffed yesterday at claims a coin found near Novato confirms a belief that Drake landed at Point San Quentin.

Edward Von Der Porten, Santa Rosa High School history teacher and archeology teacher at Santa Rosa Junior College, has been supervising digs at Drake's Bay in the Point Reyes National Seashore since 1956.

He, his students and other archeologists have located more than 800 artifacts from 16-century England in the area.

Yesterday a San Francisco newspaper reported the discovery of a 16th-century English sixpence at Rancho Olompali, site of an ancient Miwok Indian village near Novato.

"Interesting and to be expected, with all the digging they've been doing there," said Von Der Porten.

The newspaper report quoted Robert H. Power, chairman of the California Heritage Preservation Commission, that the find "gives strong confirmation to the belief that Sir Francis Drake discovered San Francisco Bay and landed at San Quentin Point."

Says Von Der Porten, "Absolute, rank nonsense."

Furthermore, "No archeologist in his right mind would make such a statement. Power is going way beyond the evidence," he said.

Von Der Porten said Charles Slaymaker, the University of California archeologist who found the coin, has himself made no such claim.

Slaymaker and Power announced discovery of the coin and Olompali artifacts at a session of the State Park Commission in San Francisco Friday.

Von Der Porten said yesterday Power, a partner in the Nut Tree restaurant at Vacaville, has been arguing for several years to have San Quentin Point named as the Drake landing site.

"He's convinced no one," Von Der Porten said. "All the scholars I know think the evidence indicates Drake's Bay, except one who is for Bolinas."

The Olompali sixpence is dated 1567, which is 12 years before Drake landed on the coast.

Power said he is satisfied the find proves Drake visited the Miwok village three miles north of Novato, west of Highway 101.

"All it proves is that the Indians somehow got their hands on an English sixpence," Von Der Porten said.

There is documentation that an Indian chief, whom the English called "The King," visited the Drake landing site nine days after the ship put ashore, indicating

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Von Der Porten

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he came from a distance.

Von Der Porten said Drake's Bay is just a little farther from Olompali than San Quentin.

Power also speculated the Olompali coin could be the one mentioned in a report of Drake's fixing a "plate of brasse" to a post at the site.

Von Der Porten said photographs of the coin, which has a small hole in it, do not support the speculation.

A brass plate was found near San Quentin Point in 1936. Von Der Porten said it had first been found near Drakes Bay and discarded before it was found again.

He said he believes studies of the plate's patina are "quite convincing that it's a genuine object."

Samuel Eliot Morison, a Harvard marine historian, has called it "a hoax perpetrated by some collegiate joker."

Von Der Porten said, "I think Morison has made a mistake. He's a first-rate historian and his comments on voyages and shipping should be read with respect, but he is not an archeologist or specialist in metallurgical studies."

At the San Francisco hearing Friday William Penn Mott Jr., state park director, said the coin find indicates Olompali may be worth protecting as a state historical unit.